

## **Bernier and his party struggle to be heard in Quebec**

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### **Body**

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Maxime Bernier's bid to take part in the election debates took a big hit last week when Quebec's biggest private television network declined to include him in its leaders' roster. Things are definitively not coming up roses for the People's Party leader in his home province.

Over the course of a few days, Bernier lost face over remarks about the mental health of climate change activist Greta Thunberg, saw his best-known Quebec candidate withdraw from the campaign and was refused a ticket to the debate most liable to put him more squarely on the province's map.

The TVA election debate, to be broadcast on Oct. 2, will offer voters their first opportunity to watch Justin Trudeau on the leaders' podium.

Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer, the New Democrats' Jagmeet Singh and the Bloc Québécois' Yves-François Blanchet will all be on hand. Bernier along with Green Party Leader Elizabeth May did not make the cut.

In contrast with Bernier, May will have another opportunity to make her case to francophone voters at the time of the French-language debate held under the auspices of the federal debates commission on Oct. 10.

Short of a reversal of the commission's preliminary decision to exclude Bernier from that lineup, the Beauce MP will not be part of any of the debates, in French or in English. The final decision on his participation is to be rendered on Sept. 16.

If anything, Bernier's exclusion from the TVA debate may shore up the commission's finding that his party does not have a reasonable chance of having MPs elected and, on that basis, fails to meet the criteria for participating in the exercise.

This latest development is good news for Scheer's Conservative party. The Conservatives hope to kill Bernier's embryonic breakaway party in the bud by defeating him in Beauce on Oct. 21.

As opposed to May, whose still limited proficiency in French limits her capacity to advance her party's case in such forums, Bernier would have scored points locally just by being on the TVA podium along with the other leaders.

The network's official reason for excluding Bernier is that his party, like May's, has never elected an MP in the province. But had TVA really wanted the PPC leader to participate, it could have tweaked its rule.

In more auspicious circumstances for his nascent party, the fact that Bernier holds a seat in Quebec might have been considered good enough to satisfy the debate's organizers.

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But for that to happen, TVA would have had to take Bernier seriously, or it would at least have had to decide that his contribution to the exchanges would make for a livelier debate. Instead, Quebec's dominant private network came to the conclusion that the PPC leader would only diminish the credibility of its exercise.

For many, the Thunberg tweet was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Bernier spent last week trying to walk back his social media depiction of the 16-year-old climate activist as "mentally unstable."

The dubious comment was part of a series of increasingly shrill tweets designed to hammer away at the notion that collective hysteria is at the core of the current climate-change debate.

That outburst was a rhetorical bridge too far for many of the commentators who might otherwise have argued for his inclusion in the debate in the name of putting as diverse a range of policy ideas on offer as possible.

The Thunberg controversy came at a time when the media is paying more attention to the PPC's Quebec roster.

Even in a province that has become so used to having placeholder federal candidates that it has a specific word to describe them, some of the "poteaux" standing in for the PPC are raising eyebrows.

Until last week, when he resigned his candidacy for family reasons, Bernier's best-known Quebec recruit was former union leader Ken Pereira, once a star witness at the provincial commission on corruption in the construction industry.

Last spring, The Canadian Press reported that Pereira was a particularly active spreader of fake news and conspiracy theories.

He was not alone. Based on an investigative report published by La Presse on Monday, the PPC is home to an echo chamber for false reports, often on themes identified with the extreme right in Quebec and elsewhere.

The Montreal daily unearthed at least 15 other Quebec PPC candidates who have been using their Facebook pages to disseminate dubious or fake information.

Those ranged from allegations that Trudeau's party has been infiltrated by Islamist cells to a false claim that tens of thousands of scientists had signed a petition to deny the existence of climate change.

There may have been a time, early on in Bernier's latest leadership adventure, when he could have hoped to enjoy native-son treatment in his home province. But Quebec's affection for leaders from the province has usually been conditional on not feeling embarrassed by their performance.

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